

Iti Fabussa
Last Choctaw Removal
to Ardmore

As Choctaw people, we embrace our sacred duty to honor our ancestors.

Whether they left our homeland on the Trail of Tears during the first removal period in the 1830s, or subsequent removals, their courage and resilient spirit live on when we remember.

This Christmas we would like to share an almost forgotten story of Choctaw ancestors who made their way by train to Ardmore, Indian Territory, during the last removals. We hope to honor them as we remember their journey.

With Oklahoma statehood fast approaching, the United States Congress sought to dissolve the Choctaw Nation in Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) and redistribute land to individual tribal members.

The General Allotment Act, or Dawes Act, was enacted for this purpose on Feb. 8, 1887.

As part of this effort, the federal government offered land allotments to Choctaw people who were still in Mississippi if they would relocate to Indian Territory.

Since many Choctaw living in Mississippi could not afford their own emigration expenses out west, the United States government planned to assist moving them in a series of removals by train before the closing of the rolls on March 4, 1907.

In researching these last removals, it became clear that land speculators used the most dishonorable methods to entice Mississippi Choctaw to go west with them, instead of waiting for free transportation from the federal government.

Sponsored by investment companies and politicians, they took full advantage of the language barrier faced by the Mississippi Choctaw people and their distrust of the government.

Land speculators used attorneys to draw up contracts in English and schemed to offer financial assistance for an alternative safe passage to Indian Territory.

Faced with the prospect of possibly being mistreated at the hands of the government, many Choctaw families in Mississippi reluctantly signed these contracts in exchange for liens on up to half their allotted lands (Roberts 1986:95).

One particular scheme was allegedly led by an Ardmore-based attorney. He organized several waves of migrations of Mississippi Choctaw people into Indian Territory, totaling over 1,000 individuals.

The attorney specifically targeted full blood, traditional Choctaw people that spoke little to no English.

These Choctaw people lived together in communities away from Euro-American society; a number of them practiced traditional medicine. Having signed contracts they could not read, they were loaded like cattle into box cars, for the long trip westward.

Once in Ardmore, they were essentially imprisoned in the Love Building, east of the Santa Fe railroad tracks on Main Street.

They had no sanitation, no heat, no ventilation and inadequate food for the duration of the brutal winter. Some of these Mississippi Choctaw

were later moved out onto farms in the surrounding Ardmore area to avoid detection.

By the closing of the Dawes Rolls in 1907, the attorney and his financial backers reportedly claimed to have liens on over 90 percent of Mississippi Choctaw allotted lands in exchange for their safe removal to Indian Territory.

What is worse, his company of men planned to sell each of the Mississippi Choctaw into slavery. It is not known how they planned to avoid the 14th Amendment or whom they planned to sell the Mississippi Choctaw to, but at least one individual was sold to a citizen of Purcell with plans to sell more (Day 1903).

In early February of 1903, someone alerted the Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes to the attorney's scheme and reported the horrible condition of the recently emigrated Mississippi Choctaw in Ardmore.

The Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes responded by sending Horace Day to investigate. He arrived on February 12 and used the next week to interview Mississippi Choctaw families around Ardmore.

Day learned that the attorney had coaxed each of the stranded Mississippi Choctaw to Ardmore with the promise of a built home, horses, wagons, and ample supplies of food and necessities, in exchange for half of their allotted land for three years, then they could purchase the land back.

After making the trip, they received none of what they were promised. Instead, they lived with 20 or more individuals in a one room house, barely enough clothes to cover them, no food, no shoes, and in the most desperate conditions.

During the first month along, at least 10 died from pneumonia or other ailments. Survivors were threatened with arrest and imprisonment if they attempted to return to Mississippi.

The Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes did not issue a statement about the situation, but Mississippi Choctaw were allotted their lands without liens later that spring.

Some settled near Ardmore in the immediate area, others as far south as Marietta and as far north as Purcell. A few made their way east to Atoka to settle with other Choctaw families.

The Mississippi Choctaw held a deep passion for the preservation of their culture, especially their songs, dances, and dress.

This passion led to the formation of the Choctaw-Chickasaw Heritage Committee of Ardmore, Oklahoma (Levine 1993).

The committee hosted both private and public outdoor traditional gatherings for the community, some lasting through the night (Levine 1993).

Gatherings were held outside at a well-maintained Choctaw dance ground in the Yellow Hills, near Ardmore (Levine 1993).

Singers cycled through over 400 songs while dancers performed deeply symbolic dances (Levine 1993). To the best of our knowledge, these same ancestors were responsible for bringing to Oklahoma the Choctaw diamond shirt and diamond dress we wear today.

Those of us with Mississippi Choctaw on our CDIB cards have ancestors who survived these last Trail of Tears removals.

As we enjoy this Christmas, let us take a moment to remember all of our ancestors for their courage, their loss, their sacrifice, and their resilient spirit along the Trail of Tears. It is in us, that they live on.

The Historic Preservation Department continues to research the families that settled in Indian Territory during this time period and would like to learn more from our readers.

Does your family have stories from these last Trail of Tears removals to share?

If so, please contact either Deanna Byrd at dbyrd@choctawnation.com or 580-924-8280 ext. 2353 or Joseph Wolf at jwolf@choctawnation.com 580-924-8280 ext. 2559.

Resources:

Day, Horace (1903) Report to the Commission of the Five Civilized Tribes. Department of the Interior. Muskogee, Indian Territory, 1-3.

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Levine, Victoria Lindsay (1993) *American Music*. 11(4) University of Illinois Press, 391-411.

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Roberts, C. (1986). The Second Choctaw Removal, 1903. In Wells S. & Tubby R. (Eds.), *After Removal: The Choctaw in Mississippi*. University Press of Mississippi, 94-111.

The Daily Ardmoreite. (Ardmore, Indian Territory). Accessed June 25, 2016.



Courtesy of Deanna Byrd, RPA, Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department
Love Building doorway in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Choctaws coming from Mississippi were kept in the Love Building. There was no sanitation, no heat, no ventilation and not enough food to last the winter.